

Compromise of 1850

Five laws enacted by the U.S. Congress (Sept. 9-20, 1850) aimed at ending sectional disputes that threatened the Union are known collectively as the Compromise of 1850. During the late 1840s the long-slumbering conflict between congressional representatives of the North and South awakened with renewed vehemence over the question of the extension of slavery into the newly acquired western territories. Northerners generally favored the WILMOT PROVISION (1846), which would have excluded slavery from these lands. Southerners, on the other hand, opposed this provision. When California sought admission to the Union as a free state in 1849, a grave crisis approached. Also causing conflict at the time were disputes over Texas boundary claims, the existence of slavery and the slave trade in Washington, D.C., and, for Southerners, the unenforceability of the FUGITIVE SLAVE LAWS.

In an attempt to preserve the Union, Henry CLAY, early in 1850, proposed a series of measures intended to satisfy both North and South. After lengthy, heated debate most of Clay's program passed. The five acts making up the Compromise provided for the admission of California as a free state; organization of New Mexico and Utah as territories that could enter the union with or without slavery; the settlement of the Texas boundary claims with the federal government assuming \$10 million in debts contracted by the Republic of Texas; the prohibition of the slave trade—though not slavery—in the District of Columbia; and a more stringent Fugitive Slave Law.

Many politicians viewed the Compromise of 1850 as the final solution to the slavery controversy; Daniel WEBSTER, whose eloquence helped secure their passage, declared them the most important legislation in 30 years. In fact, the Compromise simply postponed the conflict that the continued existence of slavery made inevitable. The issue of slavery in the territories reemerged in 1854 with the KANSAS-NEBRASKA ACT.

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Pre Civil War